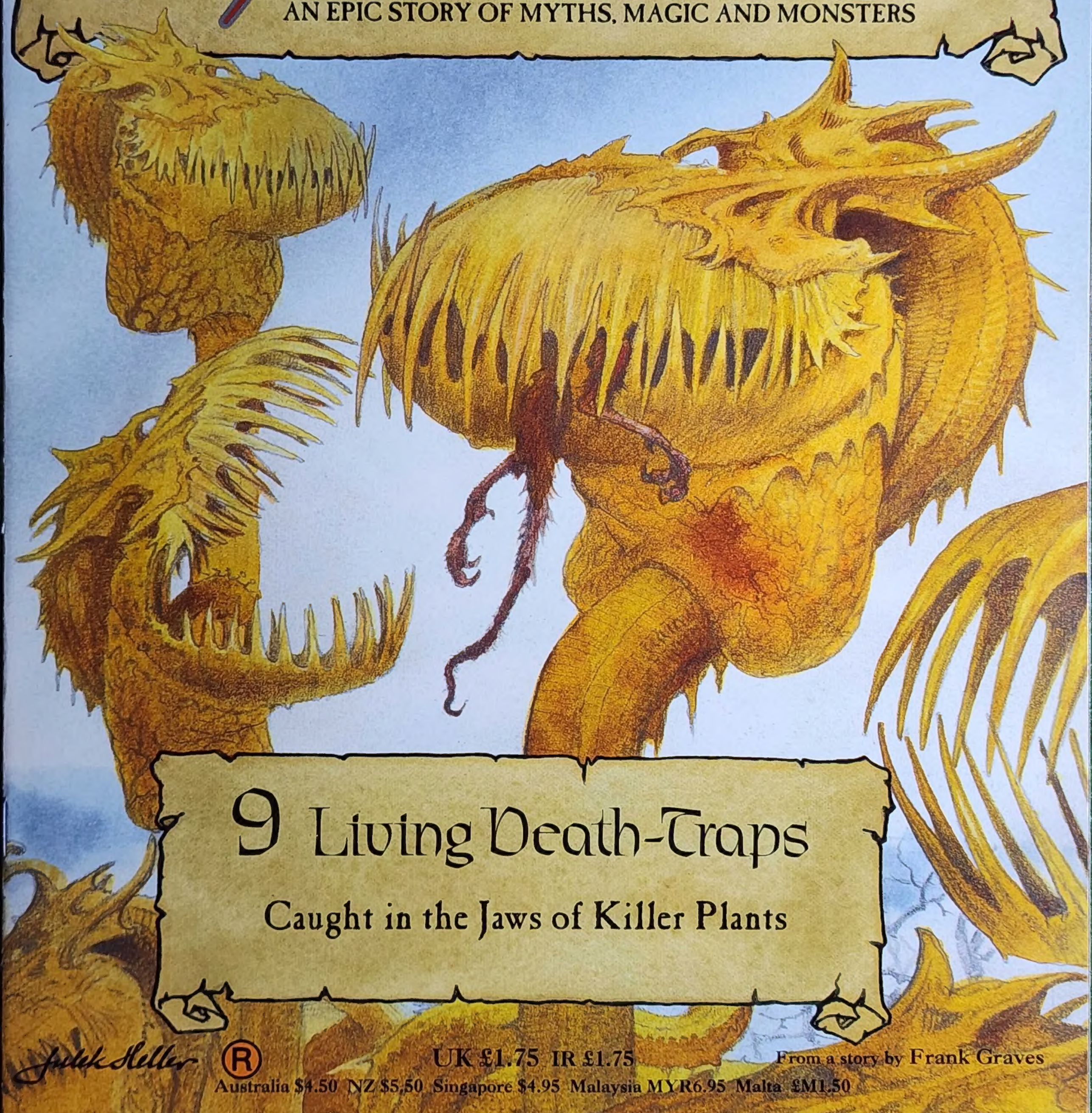
A MARSHALL CAVENDISH COLLECTION

9

IN FORTNIGHTLY PARTS

The Ancestral Trail

AN EPIC STORY OF MYTHS, MAGIC AND MONSTERS



9 Living Death-Traps

Caught in the Jaws of Killer Plants

Jarrold Heller ®

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From a story by Frank Graves

On the Ninth Day . . .

The growth, the fumes,
Beware the foe. The hungry fire
Never tires. See – it boils.
The flame. The soil.
Death believes in leather leaves.
Foes explode. The brave are slowed,
Danger waits where water flows.

In the dim, narrow corridor that led away from Enlil's infernal dungeon, countless animals were charging towards the trio, their eyes fixed in sightless stares. Orkan and Richard lifted their swords, ready for the onslaught. When they were almost upon the trio, the beasts suddenly slowed down. One by one, the creatures came to a standstill. The three looked at each other, bewildered.

Enlil's slaves had become alert, and were whispering to each other. Then, coming from the back, a heavy-set wildebeest shouldered his way through the crowd and padded over to stand before Richard.

"Greetings," he said in a deep rumble. "I am Broon, leader of the Common Beasts." He held out a mail shirt made of fine-meshed silver link. When the wildebeest slipped the metal vest over Richard's head, Richard was too surprised to move.

"This mail shirt is for you," the wildebeest said. "It is made of a metal that can withstand all weapons. It is small reward for our freedom. The Evil One's amulet that Enlil wore around his neck was the key to his power. When it was destroyed, the spell we were under was destroyed too."

Proud moment

Richard looked down. The gleaming chain-mail hung light and supple over his tunic. He thanked Broon, then told him about his adventures so far.

"Golan is waiting for all the survivors in the Ancestral City," Richard said finally. "Juroot is already on his way back, with some of his bird forces."

"We'd better get moving, then," Broon said. Together, the trio and Broon and the beasts marched to the dungeon's entrance.

When they got there, they found that the dogs, too, had returned to normal. As Orkan cut through their collars, Broon gave the trio a rough salute. "Good luck with your quest. We'll meet again in the Ancestral City."

The massive wildebeest led his band of survivors away while Richard, Orkan and Melek set off in the opposite direction, around the

volcano's slopes, towards a distant mountain range. The three found themselves walking among the brittle, charcoal-covered skeletons of giant trees. Then a deafening noise erupted nearby. The clash of shields, the fierce yells and the bark of shouted orders, were sounds they knew well.

Clash of two evils

The three were on the outskirts of a ferocious battle. Cozards had formed a tight metal box with their shields and were making vigorous inroads into a swarm of aggressive Grapfrits. A spiky winged ball disappeared under a shield. Seconds later, a bellow of agony echoed out, and the shield's owner tore away from the shelter of the box. A Grapfrit had latched on to a Cozard's cheek.

A tiny rivulet of blood trickled down the stormtrooper's face, which was falling in on itself like a punctured balloon.

At that moment, a slit appeared in the shield wall and a sword swept out to cut a low-flying Grapfrit neatly in half.

Richard stared in disgust as the Grapfrit's tightly-packed, brain-like intestines spilled out. Then the two halves flapped away in dizzy circles, bumping chaotically against the blackened skeletons of the trees, before finally falling to the ground.

"Urgh," Richard gulped, as a reek of nausea rose in his throat.

"Look!" Orkan cried, pointing at some suits of armour on the ground near the Cozards. Crumpled bags of warty skin still protruded from the neck openings of the armour, topped by

lifeless tufts of short hair.

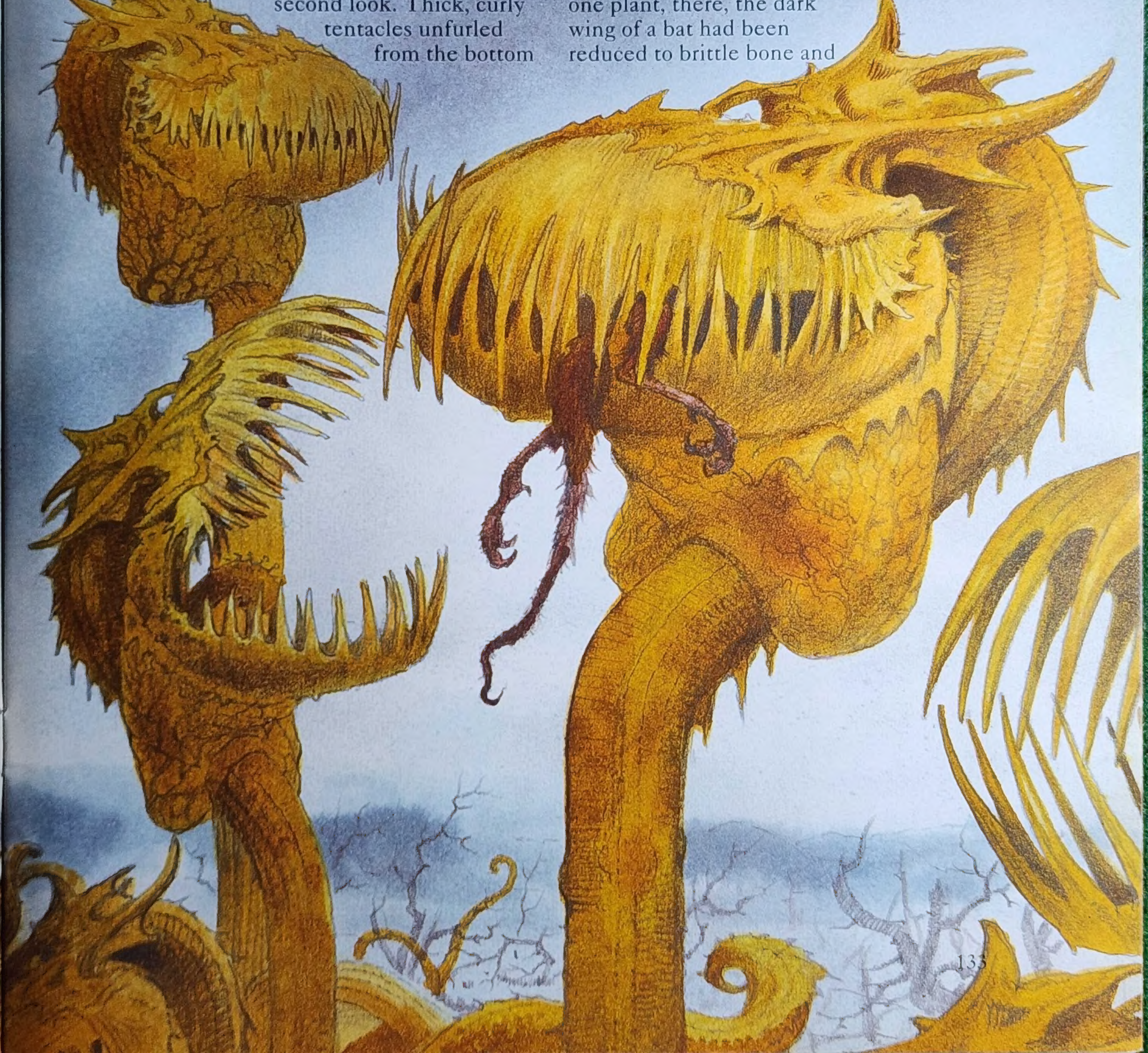
"The Grapfrits have sucked out every drop of their blood," Orkan muttered between clenched teeth.

"Then we're mad to even be here," Richard said. "Let's go."

The three backed away from the battle. As they marched on, they noticed that bronze-tinted shoots pushed up amid the charred stumps, and giant, leathery plants rose among the dead wood. Richard's throat tightened as he took a second look. Thick, curly tentacles unfurled from the bottom of each plant, and tall-necked, fleshy pitcher-shaped flowers rimmed with saw-like teeth reared up towards the sky. Their delicate amber colouring was veined with dark rust, and from their bases sprouted little tendrils, each ending in a miniature version of the parent growth.

Battle scene

There were signs of combat amid the strange plants. Here, a set of scaly claws hung limply between the jagged edges of one plant, there, the dark wing of a bat had been reduced to brittle bone and



papery skin. Orkan pointed to a large flower that sprawled nearby. A Cozard helmet and breast-plate lay in a pool of gummy soup, which brimmed over the flattened jug at the centre of the flower. Inside, writhing feelers fingered a browning mass that spilled out of the rusting armour.

"This plant looks almost alive," Richard whispered.

Just then, an odd little animal, covered in spotted fur, scuttled into view and stopped by one of the plants. Its saucer-like eyes darted nervously from side to side and its pointy, triangular ears trembled with anxiety. It sniffed the breeze cautiously. Richard glanced at Orkan, who shook his head, and murmured, "It's too nervous to be in league with the Evil One."

Melek to the rescue

The little beast leaped up and perched precariously on the edge of a wide flower. The animal tipped forward and extended its neck as if to drink. The plant's sides suddenly quivered into life and the saw-like teeth started to close, upending the creature's body into the flower.

Before his two companions could stop him, Melek sprang forward and hurried over to the plant. Orkan shrugged as the dwarf seized the creature's stiffening hind legs and hauled. The plant's grip was strong. Melek gave another tug, and then he leaned over the closing jaws of the flower.

Richard raced towards the dwarf. "Melek, come away from the plant," he shouted, "it's some kind of trap and it's closing up." His warning was too late.

The plant was heaving and contracting as Richard reached it, and Melek's upper body had slipped into the flower's bowl. First there was silence, then feeble wails of distress rose from inside the plant. The scribe's short legs were thrashing the air, caught between the closed jaws of the swelling flower. In his mind's eye, Richard pictured the feelers going to work.

FLESH-EATING PLANTS

"Orkan, quick," Richard called. "We've got to get him out. I think these plants live on flesh. They're just like enormous Venus fly-traps."

As Orkan circled round the plant, trying to find a weak spot, Richard grabbed Melek's legs and pulled for dear life. As the plant rocked, he felt his head swim. His lids dropped over his eyes and his mouth opened into a wide yawn. "The plant gives off some kind of sleep fumes," he thought, reeling back.

Richard drew his dagger and turned to Orkan. "I think we should try slicing it

open with our swords," Richard said. They both jabbed at the plant's mouth, but their blades bounced off its resilient hide.

"What about burning it open?" Richard suggested, after a moment's thought.

FIELDCRAFT FIRE

"Good idea," Orkan shot back, "you gather some dried leaves or twigs."

While Richard scrabbled round for tinder, Orkan found himself a flat stone and quickly dug a channel below the plant's undergrowth of tendrils. Then he put some stones in the small trench.

"Bring me the tinder," Orkan called.

As Orkan crushed the leaves and twigs into a cone shape over the stones, Richard saw that Melek's legs had sunk further into the plant. Only his feet were visible

now. His feeble cries could barely be heard through the thick fleshy walls of the giant flower.

"Let's light the fire," Orkan said. He looked around and picked up a sharp piece of glasslike stone. "This should be hard enough," he murmured. He drew his sword from its sheath and thrust the point into the ground next to the tinder. Then he struck the back of the blade with the piece of stone. A shower of tiny sparks flew out and the twigs crackled into life.

The plant's brittle tendrils shrivelled as small flames licked at them. They caught easily. Soon the tentacles were aflame and the flower's jaws flipped open. Richard leaped up and dragged Melek out to safety.

The dwarf coughed and spluttered while they stared aghast at his face. It was a mass of red weals, from where the devouring feelers had licked and sucked at his skin. The *Book of Prophecies* was sodden with stomach acid that evaporated into the air in thin, smoky fumes.

Saving the beast

"Are you okay?" Richard asked Melek.

"I don't know," the dwarf replied. "I feel very sleepy, and my face hurts."

"You'd better sit here and have a rest," Richard said. Then he and Orkan looked inside the burning plant. A ragged, grey-green bundle was thrashing weakly in a murky broth of stripped bones and soaked, half-digested feathers.

"It's almost dead," Orkan said. Richard's goodness shone through. He thrust his hands into the liquid, and scooped out the bundle before laying it gently on the ground. Richard winced and shook drops of burning, acid juices from his hands.

Already, blisters were appearing on his skin. Richard tried to ignore the pain.

The trembling creature turned pained eyes up at Richard, then at the plant behind him. It stiffened in terror. Before Richard could do anything to stop it, the beast bolted, a soggy length of fur scurrying through the strange vegetation.

Spreading flames

The trio turned to the plant. It was well alight now, and gave off an intense heat. Small flames were creeping along the twisted stems, and neighbouring plants were wreathed in an acrid haze. Richard helped Melek to his feet and frowned.

"The Cozards might head this way to investigate the smoke," Orkan said in alarm. "Let's get moving straightaway."

Orkan set off at a jog, and the other two loped after him, Richard supporting Melek as they hurried through the deadly forest. Before long, the burning plants were hidden from view.

Had they stayed a bit longer, the trio would have seen an arresting sight. As the fire spread along the ground, the plants split open, falling in loose strips to the ground. The soil embraced the flames greedily. Soon the earth itself was alight and little rivulets of fire were creeping in all directions. The flames reached the base of five separate plants at exactly the same time.

"What was that?" Richard asked.

The whoomph of sudden ignition had been loud enough to reach their ears even though they were a good distance away.

Turning, they saw an oily pall of smoke rise into the air. At the same time their nostrils were assailed by a smell of burning leaves overlaid with sickening fumes. A second explosion boomed out.

Caught in the blaze

"It's the plants," Richard shouted. "They're exploding. Run!"

Without hesitation, Orkan and Melek obeyed Richard's command, dodging after him as he sped along. Further detonations rumbled through the air like a muffled drumroll. Lurid plants flashed by on either side as they made for the mountains.

At that moment a dreadful screaming reached their ears. The Cozards had been caught by the explosion. The three heard the ferocious sizzling of a hot iron plunging in water, as fire slipped greedily under the stormtroopers' suits of armour and branded the sweaty flesh beneath. A loud crackling filled the air and a squadron of Grapfrits flew over their heads. They were blazing

with a bright orange flame, their wings beating desperately to escape the torment.

"Watch out," Richard cried. Orkan had already drawn his sword and was slashing at a spinning fireball. The two seared halves of a Grapfrit plummeted to earth, and fire quickly engulfed the surrounding plants.

Exploding Grapfrits

"Follow the other Grapfrits!" Orkan shouted. "They'll know the way out!"

Their guides were sorely damaged. One after the other, they blew up and crashed into oblivion, leaving only a thick streak of luminous smoke in the air.

"Run! Faster!" Orkan bellowed.

The fire was surging after the trio. They ran out of the plants, and out of time simultaneously. Before them rose the mountains that they had been aiming for, and at their feet lay a wide lake, clasped like a gravel pit beneath steep cliffs.

Richard felt the searing blast of the fire behind him. Looking down, he saw that the soil was burning, as if soaked in petrol. Dense, unbreathable fog rolled around the trio. The smoke spiralled and turned, and Golan's face appeared in the dark haze. The Guardian's gaze was on the lake, then he closed his eyes.

"Jump!" Richard shouted.

Shoomi's Sanctuary

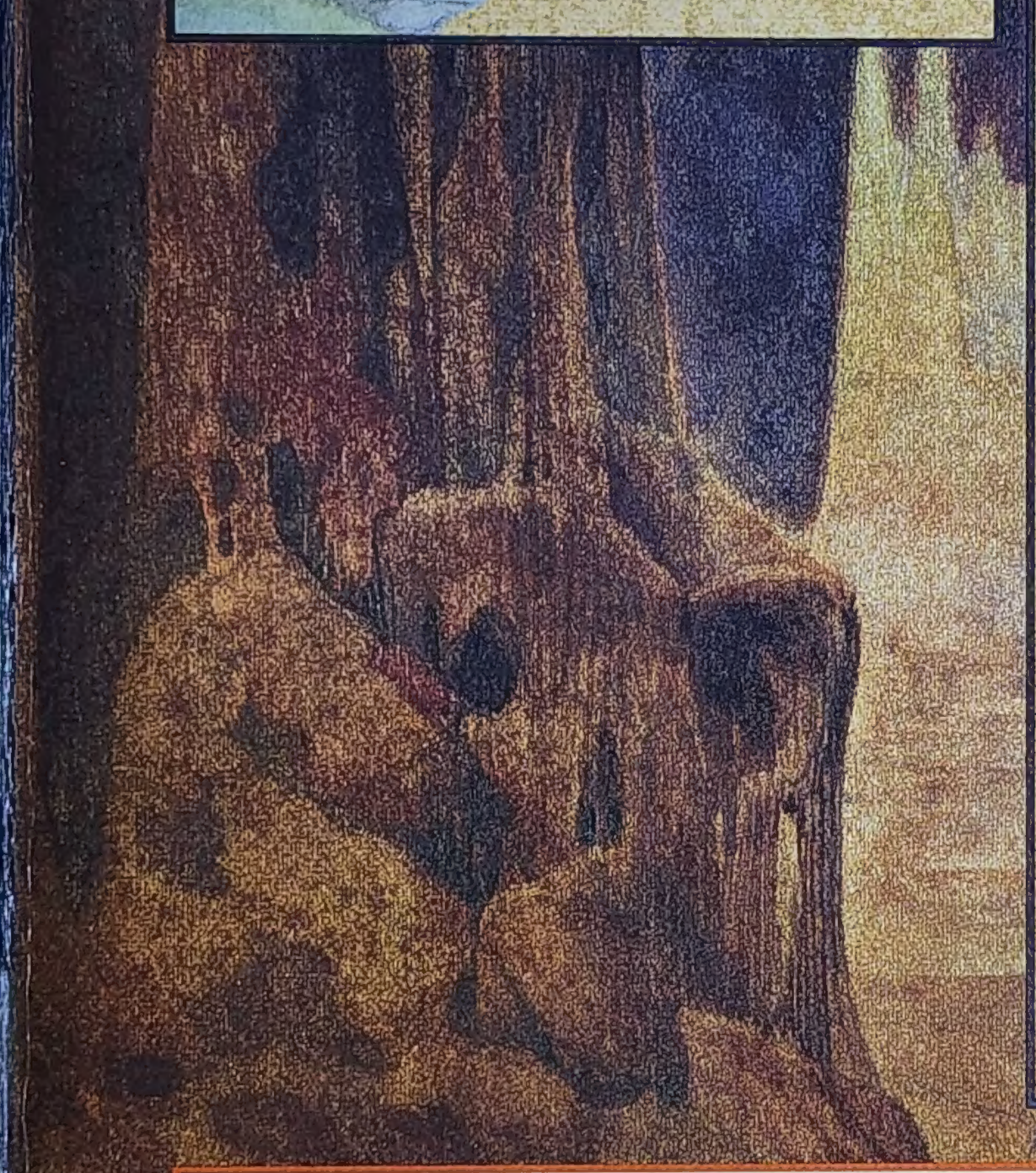
Come into this ancient domain and use your powers of observation to find . . .

Shoomi and Shoobi

Look out for these friendly little creatures again – Shoomi and Shoobi are back on the trail. Can you spot them somewhere in the illustrations in the Dead Wood?

Life Force Pod

Watch out, too, for a clue that tells you which pod Richard found in Enlil's Dungeon.



Mask of Evil

3-Minute Challenge

Can you find a fragment of the Evil One's mask hidden in the illustrations in less than three minutes?

Did you find the five bats concealed in issue 8? The bats were hidden on pages 116, 117, 122, 123 and 128.
Did you beat the challenge? If not, try again this time!

Monsters and Magic

Read about the Tree of Poisons and the Lotus Eaters on Morbane's story cards. Which of these plants do you think the Living Death Traps are based on?

In issue 8, Enlil was based on the Fire Giant.

Check your answers in the next issue.

Puzzle Map

Cut out the puzzle piece and fit it on to your Ancestral World map poster.

Power of Evil

Cut out the letter block and keep it safe. Wait for the clue that will help you form the letters into a phrase that tells you how to destroy the power of the Evil One.

Competition details will appear in future issues.

The Ancestral Trail

Cut out the location recorder card and keep it safe. Details about the role-playing game and how to play it will follow in future issues.

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In Fortnightly Parts
The Ancestral Trail
An Epic Story of Myths, Magic and Monsters
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Sorcery and Witchcraft in the Watery Depths

In Issue 10

Zibella's Fortress

More than one surprise lies in store for the trio when they find themselves in the magical crystal fortress of an evil sorceress.

plus

- From Morbane, spine-chilling tales of spirits and magicians.
- More tokens for **The Ancestral Trail** role-playing game.

Coming in Issue 11

Klaw, Servant of Evil

In the Pit of Perils, the three rescue the Guardian of Insects, then come face-to-face with her captor's hideous army. Can they survive the battle?

plus

From Morbane, tales of hauntings and bogymen • More tokens and locator cards for **The Ancestral Trail** role-playing game.

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